The New Humanity
Romans 5:12-21
October 19, 1969
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William Barclay, a very articulate British theologian and New Testament scholar, introduces the text we have before us this morning - Romans 5:12-21 - with a warning. It is, he says, at once one of the most influential and most difficult passages in the entire New Testament. On another occasion I began a sermon with a similar statement about a similar text, and was later chided gently by a listener who felt that an apologetic introduction revealed my own lack of security. That well may be, for here I confess a certain trepedation before a great and difficult portion of scripture. And I am convinced that it is far better to confess that than to either ignore the passage, or to present it in a dangerously over-simplified form. Wherever we come out, that latter approach would short change you. And so I begin with Barclay's warning. This is a very important and very difficult passage and those who still live with the myth of a "simple gospel" are about to be bored or confused, and probably both.

I would invite you, in the hackneyed school-room phrase to "dawn your thinking caps". I would hope we might think theologically this morning, and I invite you to this task, not for the sake of intellectual exercise, but because I believe God's word is appropriated to us when we struggle with the deep truths of the Gospel, and the deep doubts of our own minds.

The passage in question is made more difficult by the fact that Paul, having begun his arguement, is reminded of an objection to his logic and goes off in another direction in response to that objection. The main arguement resumes later. The printed text in your bulletin omits this digression.

A key to the major thrust of Paul's thought may be found in a contempory analagous situation. Not long ago, in a cave on a remote South Pacific island, a Japanese Soldier was discovered who had been hiding and living there - since 1944. He had never heard that the war was over. He was motivated by the reality of the struggle in which his nation was involved. When he was told that the war was over - that is, a new reality now exists - he could not and would not believe it.

That, with certain obvious limitations, is an analogy of the human predicament according to Paul. Humanity is trapped by an old set of realities that no longer exist. There is a new Reality - a new humanity - but men either cannot or will not believe it.

But this is getting ahead of ourselves. To understand Paul's thought we must come to grips with the three main themes which underlie his argument: Three ideas which he and his readers simply assumed, but which have very little currency today.

The first is the "Solidarity of Man". Paul was a Jew, and one of the cornerstones of all Hebraic thought is that mankind, humanity, is a unity, a family, or a corporate reality, and that this corporateness is prior to and more important than individuality.

The Jews thought in terms of clan, and tribe and nation. A Jew was a Jew - and for that matter still is - not because of theological persuasion - but because he is part of a people. The simple survival of the Jew and the rennaisance of Israel as a nation state is testimony to the tremendous power of this idea.

When a man committed an offense, his clan or tribe was held accountable. When one man sinned the nation was guilty. The Jews simply thought in terms of the group - not the self. When the Psalmist asked "What is man that thou are mindful of him?" he didn't mean "Who am I?" He meant "What is this corporate reality - this humanity - this 'man'?"

Now we have trouble with this central Biblical idea because we have been schooled and nurtured in its categorical opposite. "Individualism" has characterized Western thought since the Industrial Revolution. Individualism is at the base of capitalism and democracy and is firmly lodged at the focus of the American mentality. So much so that it becomes, at times, a fettish with us. I've know people who didn't like the minister talking about "the community of faith" because it sounded too much like a "commune". In any case we think in terms of the individual, not only economically, but deeply - philosophically. If we have any feel for humanity because we are

individual men." Paul, on the other hand, would say, "We are individuals because we are part of humanity."

So much for the theory; let's think about it for a minute. How many of the world's ills are the result of a denial of humanity as a reality? I think many of them. I think we are in trouble - in the world - in our nation - in our cities - because we have ridden the horse of individualism for too long. We give the United Nations short shrift; we talk about conducting an Asian land war in terms of what it will do for us; we can't even abide the idea that the guilt for the Black Man's plight has fallen on our shoulders. If history teaches us any thing it is that we are on a course that will inevitably destroy us all. Somehow - sometime we must rise above provincialism, parochialism, nationalism - individualism in its negative sense and confess that we are in this thing together. That "man" is going to live as a corporate entity in this planet - or cease to exist altogether.

When Paul used the word "man" - he meant the reality of humanity. He observed, and here we move to idea number two, that man - corporate man is in trouble.

"..... as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, so death spread to all men because all men sinned." Adam disobeyed God. He willfully did something God told him not to do. He broke the relationship between Creator and creature. And if man - and by the way Adam is the Hebrew for man - is a corporate reality, all men are involved in that sin.

That is idea number two, and we have as much trouble here as we did with number one. Paul had no reason to doubt that there ever was an Adam. And it really wouldn't have mattered if he had. But we have trouble here and the theologians haven't helped much. The early church fathers struggled with "Original Sin" - the way it was transmitted and gradually sex got involved.

As individualists, unaccustomed to thinking in terms of man as a unity we get all tied up with visions of innocent little babies whenever we hear the phrase "Orginal Sin". That too has nothing to do with Christian Faith.

Paul simply asserted that man - humanity - is involved in sin. That all men are involved in it; that it is a reality with every individual and with the whole of humanity. It is not a pleasant thought. If we are inclined, as many of us are, to be deluded about the innate goodness of the human spirit, we are in trouble. But it is real. Read the newspaper - look at our history - look deeply into your own heart. There is a sickness - a great gap between what is and what was intended to be - Paul called it Sin and saw that all men are involved.

Idea number three is that sin and death are somehow related, and that death is a reality, a power, with final authority over corporate man.

The earliest Biblical writers treat death as the punishment for sin. Because all men die. It's that simple. Paul goes deeper. Death is the result of our enslavement to sin. Sin is corporate - universal. So is death. It is a power - under the influence of which all men fall. Paul saw man - humanity - in a stream moving toward oblivion. All in all a pretty dismal, observation.

But because one man sinned and died, and all consequently follow suit, so because one man was righteious and lived - so may all men. Jesus Christ, for Paul, was a new Adam - a new or recreation. A new humanity was introducedinto that stream of life - a new man - free of sin and death. To be in Christ was to be in this "New Humanity" - this new order of things: it was to be gloriously free and gloriously alive.

To return to the Japanese soldier, it was to be told that the war is over, the enmity has been dissolved, the battle is won and life now has all kinds of beautiful possibilities it didn't have before.

All of that is what runs beneath and through this small portion of scripture. Having thought about, and hopefully still tuned in, let's ask <u>the</u> question - So What? Is it relevant - or an ancient anachromism? It can be either, of course, depending on where it leads us. I have already attempted to express the power andpotential and urgency of the ideas of human solidarity and the human predicament. The third idea, I feel is as contemporary and immediate as today's newspaper.

We don't like to talk or think about death. We go to unusual lengths to disguise the reality of death. We even prefer the phrase "pass away" in the sterile hope that it will protect us from the fact that someone is dead. And in our private, quiet

moments we think about it, and worry about it and feel afraid of it. At sometime in our late twenties or thirties a very traumatic thing happens to us. We wake up one day and realize that we are going to die. We knew it before, of course; we knew that biologically the system would stop; intellectually we had confronted death in about the same way we confronted all the other life processes. But suddenly it is real it's going to happen to me: my life is already half over. And in that moment death evolves from a biological curiosity into an existential reality - a power which begins to control our thinking, planning and living.

William Stringfellow speaks very bluntly and clearly about the power of death: "A man begins to die when he is born. Death accompanies him in every event and experience in this world; it constantly overshadows all that a man says and does; and it is the final outcome of his labor. Though a man amass graat wealth or many possessions they will neither protect him from death nor themselves be free of death. Though a man make himself an amiable reputation by his thought or words or deeds, the memory of him dies as certainly as he himself does." [Free in obedience p. 63-64]

And again - "Except for God's own intervention in this history in Christ, it is t the power of death which reigns in the world, in all things, at all times, whether recognized or not by men or nations." [Ibid p.69]

Death is a power - a reality that enslaves us - a fear which, like a parasite, extracts the joy and meaning from any and every human experience.

But what if the power of death has been defeated? What if there is a greater reality - the reality of life? What if God himself has intervened in this dismal progression in a way so simple, so magnificiently decisive that death literally, no longer has dominion over us? What if, in Stringfellow's words it is possible "to live in this life, in the very midst of death's works, safe and free from death?" [Ibid p.72]

If that were true we would have in our possession the very best news of all. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is precisely that the "what if" has happened. That, intellectually, is the Good News, as Paul struggled with it. In Christ Jesus we will live - in him we can live - now.

Personally - it can mean a New Humanity - a new life; a transforming power that changes a succession of days leading inexorably toward death into a glorious freedom - freedom to live without fear; freedom to live because death no longer has dominion.

Let us accept that: let us celebrate our new humanity - let us grasp what has been given to us. Amen.